

NEIGHBORS USE ADOPTION OPTION: Sterling Heights teen: God 'had a plan for our lives'

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Through all of it -- the beatings of the older sons by their father and then his murder, the frequent police runs to their Sterling Heights house, their mother's mental breakdown -- the four youngest Hannosh children always felt that somehow they were going to make it.

"Our souls were protected by God. He had a plan for our lives," the eldest daughter, 17-year-old Marlene, said Sunday.

"And his plan was for us to live and to meet the parents we have now," she said.

After a celebratory hearing in Macomb County Family Court last week, the four Hannosh kids -- Marlene, Monica, 15, Mark, 14, and Patty, 11 -- were granted their most fervent wish: to be adopted by the family they've come to know and love. They just happen to live across the street.

Paul and Karen Fritts were quietly raising their two sons in a comfortable four-bedroom home on Meadowview in Sterling Heights in 1996 when the Hannosh family -- a widow and her seven children -- moved into a red brick house across the street.

The children's father, Isam (Sam) Hannosh, had been shot to death the year before during an argument at a Detroit gas station. His wife, Ferial Hannosh, moved to Sterling Heights, trying to get her three oldest sons away from their drug-dealing friends in their Detroit neighborhood.

The Hannosh children were friendly and open, "but they seemed to need a lot of direction," said Karen Fritts. "We just formed a bond, like a mother-child bond. It was like, they're my kids."

A troubling start

Paul Fritts first noticed the new family on the block when he was repairing his roof and saw the oldest boy chasing down his brother and pummeling him in the Frittses' front yard.

"Hey!" Fritts said he shouted. "I don't know anything about you, but you're not



As Patricia Fritts, center right, and sister Marlene look on, Marshall, far left, walks behind his mother, Karen Fritts, as she prepares dessert on Sunday. Karen and Paul Fritts adopted four children from the Hannosh family across the street last week and the kids changed their last names. (Photos by RASHAUN RUCKER/Detroit Free Press)

To help needy kids

The Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange works to find good homes for foster children who have not been adopted because they are in a sibling group or have other concerns. Go to <http://www.mare.org> or call MARE at 866-312-8361 for more information.

Some people who cannot adopt a child could still act as mentors to foster children who are growing older and are not likely to be

going to hit that little kid!"

adopted.

That particular pummeling stopped, but not the trouble.

The older Hannosh boys, according to court records, began skipping school, using and selling illegal drugs and generally ignoring their mother.

The Children's Community Support Network can link qualified mentors with needy foster children. Call anytime at 517-373-5322.

Police frequently were called to the home, usually during late-night fighting among the three brothers.

"It was a party every night, just crazy," Paul Fritts said.

Looking for respite from the chaos at home, Marlene and the younger kids gravitated toward Paul and Karen Fritts' sprawling four-bedroom home across the street.

Mark became friends -- and a fierce video game competitor -- with the Frittses' sons: Bradley, now 17, and Marshall, now 15.

The Frittses treated the Hannosh children like family. They also helped Ferial Hannosh with money, home repairs and food.

Temporary rescues

Ferial Hannosh was alone and unable to control the boys, who had no adult male role models to keep them in line. She was hospitalized for mental problems many times over the next several years.

The younger kids were twice placed in the Macomb County Youth Home's emergency shelter and spent several months in a foster home.

In 1998, the Department of Human Services was about to remove the Hannosh children a third time when Karen Fritts walked across the street and volunteered to take them in. She was worried that the family would be split up and the kids would have to start over at different schools.

The Hannosh kids pleaded with their social workers to let them live with the Fritts family. Since no relatives offered to take in all four kids, the state agreed.

Bradly gladly gave up his room and suddenly the Frittses' home, which has just one bathroom, was a whole lot busier.

Over the next six years, the children were repeatedly removed from their mother's home and placed with the Frittses. Each stay was temporary.

Marlene said that she, her two sisters and brother were discouraged. She remembers thinking: "How are we ever going to grow up? How are we ever going to have a better life?"

"We just took it day by day."

One hard decision

Paul and Karen Fritts became licensed foster parents in 2004 so the Hannosh children could stay longer.

Ferial Hannosh, a Catholic immigrant from Syria living on disability checks, decided to sign away her parental rights to her four youngest children in October 2004.

Her oldest son is in prison, but the two other sons still live with her.

"It's hard, you know," she said Monday. "It's sad to give them away, my kids. Sometimes I get sad about it, but I can't do nothing."

It took more than a year to finish the paperwork, but last week -- on Michigan's Adoption Day -- Paul and Karen Fritts officially adopted the four kids from across the street.

"It started out just as neighbor kids coming over," said Paul Fritts, who runs his own roof tear-away company.

"But then they became available for adoption. We couldn't just leave them in the lurch with nobody."

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